



Accessing health rights for women and girls with disabilities in Palestine

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Abstract: Palestinian women and girls with disabilities encounter numerous obstacles and discrimination accessing and asserting their sexual and reproductive health and rights. It is crucial to raise awareness, involve them in decision-making processes concerning issues that affect them and provide specialised training for service providers.

The issues faced by women and girls with disabilities are among the most urgent matters that require continuous attention. It is essential to highlight the major challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities, particularly about their sexual and reproductive rights. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ([CRPD](#)) recognises their right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health without discrimination based on disability.

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States must take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to health services that take gender differences into account.

In Palestine, according to the 2017 [report](#) by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the number of persons with disabilities in Palestine was approximately 93,000, representing about 2.1 percent of the total population. Among these individuals, the percentage of women with disabilities was about [1.9 percent](#) of the total number of persons with disabilities, approximately 41,017 women.

Whilst girls and women in general face a reality full of political, legal, and social challenges, girls and women with disabilities experience even more complex challenges, creating obstacles which hinder their development and ability to live safely and with dignity. Every girl and woman has the right to access services and information, enjoy all their rights and exercise these rights freely without restrictions.

In order for women and girls with disabilities to receive the best services and information suited to them, it is essential to involve them in the decision-making process, especially concerning policies, laws and procedures that affect them. They are the most knowledgeable about their issues and have the most experience with their needs and requirements. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in [Article 4\(3\)](#), emphasises the necessity and obligation of the active participation of persons with disabilities in policies and legislation that concern them, as well as in the development and implementation of strategic plans. Moreover, inclusive decision-making allows them to make sure that their opinions are taken into consideration and that their ideas are incorporated into the decision-making process to produce good results for all parties involved. It can also be said that this participatory approach can contribute to eliminating discrimination and thus to the formation of a society that recognises the rights of every citizen and their dignity. It would help ensure their participation in the improvement of the quality and suitability of healthcare, learning, work and other aspects of life.

Furthermore, increasing the general public's understanding of the needs of women and girls with disabilities will improve understanding and support. It is also crucial to ensure that [service](#) providers are informed about the needs of girls and women with disabilities and how best they can meet those needs to ensure that they are treated with dignity and respect. In this way, through a comprehensive and non-discriminatory approach, women and girls with disabilities will be able to lead fulfilling lives, become productive members of society and realise their full potential. This approach not only benefits them but also positively contributes to society by supporting diversity, equity and human rights for all.

Gender-based violence and disability

Women and girls with disabilities are [four](#) times more likely to experience sexual violence than other women and girls of their age. Additionally, data from the 2019 Survey on

Violence in Palestinian Society indicated that 37 percent of women with disabilities have experienced [violence](#). The rate of violence varied between women with disabilities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with 30 percent in the West Bank compared to 42 percent in Gaza. Additionally, 50 percent of women with disabilities who experienced violence were subjected to psychological violence, while 20 percent faced at least one incident of [physical violence](#) perpetrated by their spouses. Overall, [27 percent](#) of individuals with disabilities (aged 18-64) experienced violence at least once by a family member.

There are many cases in Palestinian society of girls and women with disabilities who face multiple forms of violence, with society shaming them into silence. It is not just society: often, their families do the same. For instance, one girl experienced violence from her stepmother and escaped to a shelter but it did not [accept](#) her because shelters in Palestine are not equipped to accommodate girls and women with disabilities. This creates a new barrier that limits their ability to access protection and safety.

In Palestine, women and girls with disabilities often face severe abuse, including forced [isolation](#), confinement and concealment of their disability. They may also be subjected to denial of essential tools and medical care, threats of abandonment, inheritance deprivation, and physical, sexual or verbal abuse, mostly from family members. Some families also justify the removal of the [uterus](#) from these girls as a measure to manage menstruation or protect them from sexual abuse and its consequences.

Prevailing cultural attitudes continue to be a significant factor influencing the lives of women and girls with disabilities. Many families still feel a social stigma due to having a member with a disability, which significantly impacts the lives of these women and girls. This stigma is considered a barrier to their mobility and ability to lead a normal life, yet it is their right to live freely, safely and with dignity, just like other girls and women. It also hinders the acknowledgment and disclosure of the problems they face, making it difficult to convey their challenges accurately and reliably, which is essential in order to address them properly. It is important to provide periodically updated information to ensure the active participation of women and girls with disabilities in community and governmental activities, so their voices remain heard, especially directly from them. One of the obstacles is that challenges, issues and problems are often narrated through parents and caregivers, who are frequently the ones perpetrating abuse. Even if parents are not the abusers, this societal stigma about disability still stands as an obstacle to the development and freedom of women and girls with disabilities.

The mistreatment of girls and women with disabilities is exacerbated by deteriorating economic conditions and widespread [poverty](#). This is especially true given that individuals with disabilities may require significant expenses that burden the family, such as the costs of medical diagnosis and examinations, psychological support services, and health supplies. All of these are apparent reasons identified so far through research and analysis

by institutions, researchers, and workers with girls with disabilities. What if girls with disabilities were able to disclose and report what they are subjected to? Other hidden reasons that we are not yet aware of would likely emerge.

Ensuring equity

In addition to raising awareness among family members and the surrounding community about the needs of girls and women with disabilities, it is essential to work on building the capacities of service providers by developing specialised staff capable of effectively supporting people with disabilities through comprehensive training programmes. These programmes should ensure that staff can provide comprehensive health and psychological services. It is also essential to raise awareness of service providers about the specific challenges and needs faced by girls and women with disabilities, this is to ensure that the service providers are able to address and overcome the challenges successfully.

In conclusion, an inclusive approach should be developed within public facilities, and this includes providing accessible and effective technological support and providing services in multiple, accessible formats. The relevant stakeholders should also follow international human rights standards while developing and adopting policies and procedures that target individuals with disabilities. They must also inform and educate service providers on how to offer services to the vulnerable group without discriminating or violating their human rights. It is therefore important to work with organizations that focus on disability, such as [Al-Nahda](#) Association for Disabled Women, and [Al-Amal](#) Society for the Care of Persons with Disabilities. Collaborating with independent auditors and monitoring bodies can also boost the effectiveness of these actions. Interacting with such organizations and experts can be useful for service providers to increase their awareness of existing and developing trends in the field.